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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0829
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RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 7138
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 4535

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 002926

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/11/2018
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN UNIONS, IDEOLOGY, AND THE ARMED CONFLICT

REF: A. BOGOTA 2387
[1](#)B. BOGOTA 590

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Labor advocacy groups complain that Colombia's three main confederations focus too much on politics, hindering efforts to improve wages and worker conditions. The confederations have made some progress in moving away from their traditional hard-left orientation, but continue to struggle with unreconstructed communist elements. In particular, radical leftists retain significant influence within the CUT (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores), the largest confederation. The recent CUT elections underscore these divisions and parallel the efforts of the far-left to maintain their hold on the opposition Polo Democratico Party. The smaller confederations remain closer-to-center politically, and will continue their efforts to remain independent from the CUT. End summary.

POLITICS, ARMED STRUGGLE, OR LABOR RIGHTS?

[1](#)2. (C) The CUT, the largest of the three labor confederations in Colombia with over 547,000 members, contains radical, left-wing Marxists as well as a smaller Liberal party contingent. Former FECODE (Federacion Colombiano de Educadores) Secretary General and former CUT President (1998-2003) Hector Fajardo tells us the CUT did not affiliate with either the Communist or the Social Democratic international confederations due to opposition by the Communist party, the Maoist Movimiento Obrero Independiente Revolucionario (MOIR), and the Trotskyites. In 2006, they affiliated with the Social Democratic international confederation, which later became the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Even then, Rhett Doumitt of the AFL-CIO affiliated Solidarity Center said the Communists literally "turned the lights out" at the convention in a last ditch attempt to block this affiliation. He complained of a "Stalinist" approach taken by Communist and other hard-left labor leaders within the CUT.

[1](#)3. (C) Former CUT President (2002-2008) Carlos Rodriguez tells us 80% of CUT leaders are affiliated with the opposition party Polo Democratico, and 20% are from the Liberal Party. The CUT distinguishes among union affiliates by calling them either the far-left "clasistas" or the more moderate "democraticos". The current CUT Legal Secretary

Fabio Arias tells us the primary difference between the clasistas and the democraticos is whether or not they sympathize with the FARC. Democratic Maoist and Executive Secretary of the CTC (Confederacion de Trabajadores de Colombia) Ivan Torro told us the democraticos are pragmatists and believe in using the institutions to promote social and labor changes. In contrast, the clasistas are anti-capitalist, undemocratic (even within their own institutions), and ambiguous if not sympathetic to the leftist armed struggle.

14. (C) CUT President Mora tells us the labor movement in Colombia is about "greater social change", not just improvements in labor conditions. USO (Union Sindical Obrera de la Industria del Petroleo) Secretary General Daniel Rico Serpa tells us it is the "responsibility" of the 100% clasista USO petroleum union (affiliated with the CUT) to defend the people of Colombia from the interests of multinationals. He says 100% of the strikes called by 60,000-affiliate USO have been for political reasons, not labor issues. In a recent meeting, USO requested we review terrorist visa ineligibility on three USO Executive Council members; left-leaning think tank Arco Iris tells us the USO historically has been infiltrated by the ELN. Similarly, CUT-affiliated FECODE, the largest union in Colombia claims 280,000 affiliates, has strong ties to the Maoist party.

15. (SBU) Doumitt complains that the politics of the labor movement in Colombia impede positive, practical advances on labor issues. In the April 22 monthly "labor dialogue" meeting with President Uribe, the confederations focused discussions on the investigations of the Colombian congressmen associated with the parapolitical scandal. CGT (Confederacion General de Trabajadores Democraticos) International Relations Secretary Jose Leon Ramirez notes there was no discussion of labor issues at the meeting. Still, Doumitt says the unions have made progress in moving away from their traditional polemic cold war perspectives. Polls show 45% of the public has a negative perception of unions in part due to their focus on leftist ideology and politics at the expense of pocketbook issues.

CUT MIRRORS POLO AND MOVES FAR-LEFT

16. (SBU) The efforts of far-left elements to gain control of the CUT mirrors similar efforts by the Communists and Maoists to consolidate their power in the Polo Democratico party (see reftel a). The democraticos had the majority of the votes in the May 30 CUT elections, but Mora, a democratico, made a side deal with the clasistas and the liberals to form a coalition that put him in power. Sources tell us this was facilitated by current Polo Democratico party leadership who promised to support him as a Polo senate candidate in the next elections. Polo Senator Gustavo Petro told us the "Stalinists" used their control over the unions to gain control of the Polo, and are now manipulating their grasp of the Polo party machinery to retain their hold on the CUT. The democraticos filed four election complaints with the Ministry of Social Protection, but Mora says the election controversy has passed. CTC International Director tells us the CUT democraticos are holding up Mora's access to CUT funding.

SOME UNIONS MAINTAIN AMBIGUOUS STANCE VIS-A-VIS ARMED STRUGGLE

17. (C) The CUT condemned "all forms of struggle" for the first time in 1992, but its relations with the armed struggle remain ambiguous. Domingo Tovar Arrieta, considered radical by the clasistas, is now the Secretary General of the CUT. On the election results list sent to us by unionists, he was listed as "ELN." Arrieta is also ineligible for a U.S. visa due to terrorist ties. Three CUT unionists attended a labor symposium in Ecuador in 2007 that endorsed the armed

insurgency in Colombia. The FARC and ELN were listed as signatories of the declaration. The unionists claimed they did not know about the FARC and ELN attendance; a CTC source claims they were not so innocent (see reftel b). Researcher Mauricio Romero from left-leaning think tank Arco Iris tells us the ELN strategy was to infiltrate unions to promote their revolutionary agenda. He tells us the FARC targeted unions to a lesser extent, infiltrating to obtain information for kidnapping and extortion operations more than for political means.

THE SMALLER CONFEDERATIONS - CLOSER TO CENTER

18. (SBU) The CGT, with approximately 114,000 affiliates, identifies less clearly with the opposition to the GOC. CGT Secretary General Julio Roberto Gomez tells us their membership consists of 50% Polo Democratico and 50% Uribistas. Elections are infrequent and Gomez is known for his authoritarian style and "opportunistic spirit." CTC and CUT leaders claim he makes deals with the GOC and international confederations for personal gain, not for the sake of the labor movement. He was recently selected to be the Assistant President of the new Labor Confederation of the Americas (CSA). Linda Chavez-Thompson of the AFL-CIO is CSA President. The CGT was historically tied to the Christian Democratic international labor confederation, and is now a member of the ITUC.

19. (SBU) Gomez tells us he is not "part of the club" that blames Uribe for everything--rather, he blames all of the presidents since 1971 for their anti-union policies. He tells us a "racket" has developed around the violence against unionists, and the CUT and "their cronies in the National Union School (ENS)" are using the issue to garner more international funding. Gomez says the CUT advocates for a policy whereby confederation financing is directly related to the number of murders per confederation. He says the unions should focus on labor rights issues, as the labor violence argument is not as strong.

110. (U) The smallest labor confederation, the CTC, has about 47,000 members. The CTC almost always aligns with the CUT on labor issues, but its strongest political ties are to the traditional Conservative and Liberal parties. The CTC was historically tied to the Social Democratic international labor confederation, and is now part of the ITUC. ENS Director Sanin is hopeful that with all three labor confederations now inside ITUC as well as the newly created CSA, they will be pressed to cooperate on key labor issues. CUT lawyer and consultant Carlos Rodriguez Mejilla notes the three national labor confederations face pressure from the CSA to merge nationally within the next two years. The ENS, Solidarity Center and the confederations say this will not happen anytime soon due to their leaders' rival personal, political, and financial interests.

BROWNFIELD